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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the methodological and ethical issues that one educational researcher encountered throughout his work, focusing on the importance of understanding teachers' thinking from their perspective (an insider looking out rather than an outsider looking in). It highlights a collaborative research relationship that the researcher had with an experienced high school English teacher, Anna. Using life history, ethnographic, and narrative approaches, the researcher explored the history and evolution of Anna's beliefs about literacy and how those beliefs were related to her teaching practices throughout her career. Anna's story was situated within the larger context of a self-study. The researcher conducted 10 formal interviews with Anna; held dozens of informal conversations with her over 5 years; made over 50 visits to her classroom; spoke with people familiar with her about her teaching practices and thinking about literacy; and examined copies of professional documents. The researcher highlighted: what was relevant, true, necessary and ethical in his account of Anna; the value of friendship; problems with informed consent; the importance of doing no harm; the benefits of anonymity; and sharing the risk. (Contains 30 references.) (SM)

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# METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN A LIFE HISTORY STUDY OF TEACHER THINKING

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## METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN A LIFE HISTORY STUDY OF TEACHER THINKING

During the past decade, there has been an increasing interest among educational researchers in understanding the lives of teachers (e.g., Ball & Goodson, 1985; Goodson, 1992, 1995; Witherell & Noddings, 1991)—including the ways they think about their subject matter (Stodolsky, 1988) and curriculum in general (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Important in this work is an emphasis on understanding teachers' thinking from *their* perspective—from the perspective of an *insider* looking around, and not from that of an *outsider* looking in. Such an emphasis has resulted in an increase in the use of life history and narrative approaches in studies of teacher thinking and teacher socialization (see, e.g., Carter, 1993; Casey, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Elbaz, 1990; Goodson, 1992).

In line with this kind of research, for five years, I was involved in a collaborative research relationship with Anna,[1] an experienced high school English teacher in urban Detroit, Michigan. Utilizing life history, ethnographic, and narrative approaches, I explored the history and evolution of Anna's beliefs about literacy, and how these beliefs were related to her teaching practices throughout her career. In addition, recognizing that all research is inherently autobiographical, I situated Anna's story within the larger context of a self-study—with a particular emphasis on my own evolving life story as a student, a classroom teacher, a teacher educator, and a researcher. This project served as my doctoral dissertation at The University of Michigan (Muchmore, 1999).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the methodological and ethical issues that I encountered throughout my work—in the hope that I may inform the practices of other researchers who undertake similar kinds of studies.

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[1] A pseudonym.

## Background of the Study

I first met Anna 10 years ago when we were both enrolled in a graduate course taught by Pamela A. Moss that focused on authentic literacy assessment. Anna was a fellow doctoral student at The University of Michigan as well as a full-time public school teacher in urban Detroit. The course was structured more like a working research group than a formal class; each week we explored issues concerning student writing, accountability, and portfolio assessment. Throughout our weekly meetings, we regularly shared our insights about writing, students, and teaching in general—and we all valued the reflective wisdom that Anna brought to the table. With almost 25 years of experience as a classroom teacher, Anna exuded a quiet confidence in her teaching—and whenever she talked about her classroom, I never sensed any of the underlying dissatisfactions and frustrations that I had experienced when I was a public school teacher. The more I got to know Anna, the more I found myself wondering how she had gotten to this point in her career.

The course culminated in a classwide presentation of our work at the 1991 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago. Afterward, instead of disbanding, Pamela Moss and several class members accepted an invitation from Anna to collaborate with her and a few of her colleagues in the English Department at Windrow High School Windrow is a comprehensive high school located in urban Detroit, with an enrollment of approximately 2400 students, 99.5% of whom are African-American. As co-researchers, we decided to focus our inquiry on student writing, authentic literacy assessment, and teachers' professional development. My study with Anna arose in the context of this ongoing work at Windrow High School.

About five months after our project at Windrow began, I was required to conduct a semester-long ethnographic study for a course that I was taking on

qualitative research methods—and I needed both a site and a topic. Since I was already going to Windrow one day a week, I thought it would make sense to dovetail this assignment with my ongoing work there. All I needed then was a topic. Having just completed a large-scale survey study of teachers' beliefs and practices (Muchmore, 1994), which involved more than one thousand Chapter 1 teachers[2] in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, I was interested in pursuing a topic involving teacher thinking—but this time I wanted to use a qualitative approach and focus my attention on just one teacher. Given my ongoing relationship with Anna, as well as my previous curiosity about her career as a teacher, she seemed to be a logical choice. What were her beliefs about reading and writing? What did she do in her classroom? To what extent were her beliefs and practices related? How had this relationship been mediated by the teaching contexts that she had experienced throughout her career? What kinds of pedagogical decisions had she made in response to such contexts? These are some of the questions that I formulated while initially conceptualizing the study.

When I first presented my idea for this study to Anna, her reaction was one of surprise. Why would I ever want to study her? As a private person, genuinely modest about her teaching accomplishments, Anna would probably have preferred not to have drawn attention to herself through this kind of a study. However, because she trusted me as a colleague, and perhaps because she felt some sense of obligation to me as a friend and as fellow graduate student, she did agree to participate. At the time, however, neither of us could have possibly

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[2]"Chapter 1" refers to Chapter 1 of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965, as amended by the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988. This legislation, which was originally part of President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty," provides assistance to low-achieving students from low-income neighborhoods. Although the name of the law was changed from "Chapter 1" to "Title I" when it was it was amended by the United States Congress in 1995, I have chosen to use the old name here since it is the one that was in use when I conducted my survey.

imagined the scope and complexity of such a project, which ultimately ended up spanning more than five years and evolving into my dissertation.

## Methods

My study with Anna utilized life history and ethnographic methods (e.g., Denzin, 1989a, 1989b, 1995; Van Maanen, 1988, 1995; Van Manen, 1990; Wolcott, 1995). In order to learn about Anna's beliefs and practices, I conducted 10 formal interviews with Anna, plus dozens of informal conversations over a five-year period. I also made more than 50 visits to her classroom in Detroit, assuming the role of a participant observer, and recording fieldnotes. In addition, under Anna's direction, I spoke with some of her friends, relatives, colleagues, and past and present students—all of whom were familiar, to varying degrees, with her teaching practices and her thinking about literacy. Another source of information included a collection of 19 academic papers that Anna had written for various college courses she had taken throughout her career. In these papers, she regularly discussed issues related to literacy and teaching, which provided many insights into her thinking. Finally, she provided me with copies of various professional documents—including newspaper clippings about her, past and present evaluations of her teaching conducted by various school administrators, and other professional documents. Taken together, all of this information enabled me to construct an in-depth narrative portrait of Anna's life as a teacher, with a particular focus on the evolution of her literacy beliefs and practices.

In many ways, this project had the potential to be an incredibly intrusive undertaking—one that required the building of a great deal of trust. For Anna and me, this trust was initially based on our pre-existing friendship; we already knew each other and already had a working relationship before we began this collaboration. Over time, however, this trust would no doubt have waned if we both had not worked hard to maintain it. For example, I always tried to share my

thinking with Anna, and I provided her with copies of everything that I wrote—including my fieldnotes, my interview transcripts, and my analyses. My work, in turn, benefited from her insights and feedback. I also made a special effort not to delve into areas which Anna and I agreed were off the record, and I encouraged her to largely define the nature and scope of her participation.

For her part, Anna was always honest and forthright with me in making suggestions and offering opinions about my work. And, she was very patient with me, providing me with a great deal of latitude to figure out what I was doing, and supporting me when I have stumbled. Fifteen years older than me and a fellow graduate student at the time, Anna was always been much more of a colleague to me—or even a mentor—rather than a research subject.

## Some Methodological Issues

Like many qualitative researchers, I was initially overwhelmed by the sheer volume of paper documents that my research generated. Deciding what to include in my final report—and what to leave out—was not an easy task. My initial impulse was to try to include everything. In the beginning, I envisioned myself as a kind of container into which Anna was pouring out her story; I felt that it was my job to preserve and report everything exactly as I had received it. To leave something out, I felt, would be dishonest. However, as my understanding of life history research grew, I realized that this container metaphor was not appropriate—for viewing myself as a mere receptacle for Anna's story implied a degree of precision and a degree of certainty in my work that simply did not exist. Anna's stories were much too fluid and changing for me to ever capture them in this way. No matter how hard I might try, they would always be incomplete; such is the nature of life history research. Ultimately, I reasoned, what did it matter whether elements of Anna's story were left out inadvertently or deliberately? In both cases, something would still be missing—

and I felt that it would be much more honest for me to deliberately edit Anna's story and reveal my criteria for doing so, than to naively present an inherently incomplete version of her life as if it were the definitive account.

Deciding what to include—and what to leave out

My criteria for deciding what to include in my account of Anna's story were based largely upon the following four questions: 1) Is it relevant? 2) Is it true? 3) Is it necessary? and 4) Is it ethical?

Is It Relevant?

In deciding what was relevant, I continually reminded myself of the purpose of the study, which was to understand Anna's literacy beliefs and practices. Thus, I was able to eliminate much extraneous data which, while interesting, were not directly relevant to the study. For example, I gathered a great deal of information about the history of Windrow High School and could easily have written several chapters about its evolution from a modern, orderly, state-of-the-art institution in the 1950s to an aging, underfunded, and sometimes chaotic building in the 1990s where the faculty regularly faced challenges that school's early teachers could never have imagined. However, such detail would have been far beyond what was needed to establish the historical context of Anna's career.

Similarly, I could have explored issues relating to race and gender. For example, being a white researcher in a school where more than 99% of the students were African-American, I could have made race a primary focus of my paper. Or, being a male researcher working with a female teacher, I could have focused heavily upon issues of gender. I feel that both of these issues are very important and deserve to be studied. However, because my work with Anna did not evolve from a point of view that was conspicuously rooted in either of these

issues, I decided that it would be inappropriate for me to make them central to my dissertation after the fact.

## Is It True?

In deciding what was true, I relied primarily upon my informed judgment, combined with input from Anna. One advantage of doing an in-depth interpretive study with one person which lasts for several years is that a researcher develops a heightened sense of what is true—an ability to see beyond initial impressions. Having known Anna over a long period of time and having interacted with her in a variety of settings, I was able to craft a version of her life which contained a higher degree of truth than if I she had simply been an anonymous respondent to a survey. By "truth," I am not referring to the correspondence of a set of facts to an objective reality that exists outside of human thought. In my opinion, such a goal is unattainable. Instead, I am referring to the correspondence of a set of facts to the subjective reality that was negotiated between Anna and me throughout our years of collaboration. And, beyond mere facts, I am referring to the internal coherence and consistency of her story and the extent to which it conveys some aspect of her personal essence. Does it sound like Anna? Does it accurately convey the mood of her classroom? Throughout our collaboration, these were questions that Anna herself continually helped me to answer.

Whenever I wrote something for my study—whether it was fieldnotes, interview transcripts, or a draft of my paper—I always shared it with Anna and solicited her feedback. In seeking her assistance, however, I was mindful of her time and tried not to usurp it. I generally left it up to her to decide how much she was willing and able to do, recognizing that there was a fine line between neglecting her input and demanding too much. The feedback which she ultimately provided was not typical of what one might expect from a high school

English teacher. She tended *not* to underline phrases, insert words, cross things out, or provide extensive notes in the margins. In fact, she seldom wrote on my papers at all, which, interestingly, was the same way that she responded to the papers of her students. While she did point out glaring mistakes—such as the occasional misspelled word or a factual error—her feedback tended to be much more general and holistic. She said things such as, "I like the image you have created here," or "This doesn't quite sound right; it doesn't reflect the complexity of the situation."

Is It Necessary?

In deciding what to include, I also continually asked myself whether or not particular pieces of information were necessary—both to the story that I was trying to tell and to the overall quality of my writing. Because the effectiveness of interpretive research rests largely in the nature and quality of its presentation, I sometimes left out relevant and truthful information simply for the sake of rhetorical integrity. Paying careful attention to the craft of my writing, I tried to chose those stories or vignettes that best represented the themes that I had identified, and I wove them into what I hoped was rich and compelling prose. For instance, when I described Anna's life and career, I excluded a great deal of information that was redundant or might otherwise have detracted from the quality of my writing due to its sheer volume. With hundreds of pages of interview transcripts from which to draw, I had to be selective, choosing representative passages to exemplify particular themes rather than trying to include everything.

Sometimes, the information that I included was influenced by my own human limitations. On some days I simply had more time and energy to devote to my work, and the fieldnotes that I produced on these days tended to be more thorough and complete. Thus, when crafting my dissertation, I often included

excerpts from these more polished fieldnotes, and excluded others, simply because the quality of my writing made it easier for me to incorporate them into my work. Nevertheless, I sometimes did go back and expand upon sets of under-developed fieldnotes at times—especially when they dealt with important themes that did not appear elsewhere in my fieldnotes in a more polished form.

## Is It Ethical?

Finally, in deciding whether or not it was ethical to include something in my writing, I was guided by Kant (1785/1959), who maintains that we should always treat people as ends in themselves, never as merely the means to an end. Following this tenet, I tried to show the utmost respect for Anna, her students, and her colleagues. This means that I did not include personal information that might cause someone undue embarrassment, and I did not include personal information that Anna asked me to keep "off the record." I also excluded most of the gossip about teachers, students, and administrators that I overheard while visiting the school, even though some of it was quite interesting and may have been relevant to my study. Throughout my work, I always placed ethical considerations above the criteria of relevance or truth—reasoning that there were enough interesting, relevant, and truthful stories for me tell without delving into issues that violated the mutual trust and respect that Anna and I had worked so hard to build and maintain.

Such a stance raises an important issue, however. If I deferred to the participants in deciding what to include and what to leave out, then what prevents there from being a muted, distorted, and diluted version of events? What confidence do readers have that they are getting the "truth?" I feel that these kinds of concerns are unwarranted because they assume that there is only one way to tell a story. They assume a singular reality. I can tell a story that accurately conveys the tenor and ambiance of a situation without revealing *every*

aspect of it with which I am familiar. As I learned throughout my work with Anna, it is impossible to record *everything*. Some things have to be left out, if for no other reason than there is not enough space to include them. Furthermore, I maintain that researchers' choices must be informed by considerations beyond mere editorial concerns. They must be informed by ethical considerations, as researchers meticulously weigh their obligations to the participants against those to prospective readers. In the remainder of this paper, I elaborate upon some of the ethical issues that are inherent in all life history and ethnographic studies and describe how Anna and I approached them.

## Walking an Ethical Tightrope

Unlike traditional educational research, in which relationships between researchers and participants are characterized by business-like transactions that rarely extend into the realm of the personal, life history and ethnographic approaches can involve relationships that are personal and complex. For example, what gave me the right to study Anna? Who was I to interpret her life as a teacher? What obligations did I have to Anna? ...to her students? ...to her colleagues? And what obligations did they have to me? These are some of the questions that I will address.

There is no set of hard and fast rules for ensuring ethical behavior in life history and ethnographic research (see, e.g., Cassell, 1982, Lincoln, 1990, Magolda & Robinson, 1993, Measor & Sikes, 1992, Punch, 1994). There are only guiding principles. Because ethical dilemmas are usually deeply embedded within the contexts of the situations in which they arise, what may be ethical behavior in one circumstance may not be ethical in another. For instance, it is not always ethical for a researcher to share with the participants "everything" that he or she has written, as I did with Anna. One of my colleagues once told me of an ethnographic study that he conducted on the organizational management of a

large company. He entered into this study with the promise that he would help the company by sharing whatever he learned. When it came time to disseminate his findings, however, he realized that some of the information he collected—while possessing a great deal of value to the existing research literature—had little or no potential value to the research participants. In fact, given the politics of the workplace, he felt that it might actually be harmful. It had the potential to cause ill-feelings among some of the company's employees and perhaps damage their working relationships. In the end, he decided to exclude this kind of information from the report that he shared with the company, while including it in an article that he later published in a scholarly journal. It was not an easy decision, he said. On the one hand, he felt ethically obliged to share "everything" with the research participants, while, on the other hand, he knew that such a stance was hopelessly naive. He chose a compromise—one which he hoped would preserve the work climate of the company while simultaneously serving his need to publish.

Such ethical dilemmas are no less prevalent in collaborative research involving teachers. Cole and Knowles (1993) provide a useful guide for thinking about the ethical dimensions of teacher/researcher partnerships that utilize life history and ethnographic approaches. Unlike traditional teacher research—which is based upon an objective, logical-deductive view of knowledge that is typically derived from hypothesis testing and statistical analyses—life history and ethnographic approaches are consistent with the belief that teaching is a complex, personal endeavor shaped by influences beyond those which can be ascertained through rating scales, surveys, and narrowly focused observations. Because these kinds of studies typically involve the formation of human relationships that are far more complex than the limited, impersonal, business-like transactions that characterize traditional studies, their ethical dimensions cannot be effectively

addressed through typical standardized procedures, such as using pseudonyms or obtaining the approval of a Human Subjects Review Board. Instead, they must be continually dealt with at every phase of a research endeavor (Cole & Knowles, 1993).

## The Value of Friendship

Anna and I began our collaboration as friends and colleagues and because our pre-existing friendship was based on ideals of honesty, parity, trust, and mutual respect, it was only natural that our research relationship continued with these same principles. Anna was involved in every phase of the project, and we were fortunate to have never experienced any great rifts in our friendship. Nevertheless, someone once asked me, "What if you had discovered during your research that you no longer liked Anna as a person? What if she had turned out to be completely different from the person you thought she was? What would you have done?" I was intrigued by this question, and responded, "It definitely would have changed my research—and perhaps even ended it. I am certain that if Anna had suddenly made this same kind of realization about me, then she would definitely have ended it. Even if we had been able to work through such a problem, it certainly would have changed the tenor of our relationship. It would have been much more difficult for me to write about Anna and share my work with her if I did not like her as a person."

Recognizing the importance of maintaining an open and honest dialogue, Anna and I spent a great deal of time talking about the ethical dimensions of our work. She once told me about a conversation that she had with a mutual acquaintance, whom we both knew professionally. Several months earlier, I had casually mentioned my ongoing work with Anna to this person, and it had come up again in their conversation. Our friend was highly indignant about what I was doing. "How dare he!" she had stated to Anna, wanting to know what gave me

the right to study Anna's life. Hearing about this incident forced me to stop and think about a difficult question. What did give me the right to study Anna's life? On one level, the answer rested with Anna herself. After all, it was *she* who has given me the right to study her life. It was *she* who has consented. But was her informed consent enough?

## The Problem with Informed Consent

In the 1970s, in order to ensure the ethical treatment of human subjects, the United States Congress passed the National Research Act, which mandated that all researchers must obtain the "informed consent" of those whom they study. Under this law, researchers were obliged to tell their subjects, in advance, about the risks and benefits of their proposed participation and advise them that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure compliance with this mandate, hospitals, universities, and other institutions began to require that all studies involving human subjects be submitted to specially-formed committees for approval. For me, this process involved the filling out of a rather lengthy form, which unfortunately turned out to be much more of a bureaucratic hurdle than a truly useful exercise.

The problem was that the questionnaire was based upon a positivistic model of research which did not honor the kind of relationship that undergirded my work with Anna. For instance, it asked how I had recruited my subjects. "Be sure to specify the exact wording of requests, notices, or advertisements," it stated. Since I had neither "recruited" Anna in the sense that was implied by the question, nor did I regard her as my "subject" in a traditional researcher/ subject relationship, I did not quite know how to respond. The stakes were high. Because the Committee had the power to stop my study, I did not want to offend any of its members. I feared that it might include people who did not understand interpretive research and would be biased against it. In the end, I simply

explained how Anna and I had become acquainted and how the study had evolved—hoping that this would suffice. Fortunately, the committee accepted my explanation.

Another question asked me to indicate whether my study involved the use of deception, punishment, drugs, covert observation, physical harm, and so forth.... The list went on, dealing entirely with the most egregious kinds of unethical conduct imaginable--none of which were applicable to my situation. Far more relevant to my kind of study would have been questions such as the following: What information will you share with the research participants? What information will you withhold? Why? How will you resolve disputes if the participants disagree with your findings? Will you disseminate it above their objections?

Finally, the Committee wanted to see a copy of Anna's signed Informed-Consent Form—as if such a document was all that was needed for my study to be deemed "ethically correct." In survey research—where direct human contact is usually minimal and there is little uncertainty about what will happen as the study unfolds—obtaining informed consent is relatively straightforward and unproblematic. Life history and ethnographic research, on the other hand, typically involve the establishment of deep and sometimes prolonged interpersonal relationships that continually change and evolve over time. In this kind of research, there is often a high degree of uncertainty about how a study will unfold and what kinds of risks the participants will ultimately face, and it is simply impossible to obtain informed consent through a single a priori encounter. Instead, it must be continually negotiated and re-negotiated in the context of a caring relationship between the researcher and the participant throughout the entire duration of the study.

## Doing No Harm

Sometimes, life history research can involve risks that neither the researcher nor the participants can possibly foresee. In the 1920s, for instance, Clifford Shaw, a University of Chicago sociologist, entered into a research partnership with a young juvenile delinquent named Stanley. Under Shaw's guidance, Stanley wrote an autobiography that was later published as *The Jack-Roller* (Shaw, 1930). Shaw made every attempt to be ethical in his dealings with Stanley—treating him with compassion and respect, protecting his identity with a pseudonym, and even functioning as his social worker at times. With Shaw's help, Stanley was eventually able to overcome his criminal past. Ten years after the book was published, however, Stanley and his wife were involved in a marital dispute, and she used the book as a reason to have him confined to a mental institution. "She threw *The Jack-Roller* book at me," Stanley said years later. "The law in Illinois was that if a woman wants to keep you there, all she has to say is that 'I fear for my life, he wants to kill me'" (Snodgrass, 1982, p. 14). Although neither Shaw nor Stanley could have possibly foreseen such a risk, this scenario underscores the limitations of informed consent as a protection against harm.

In agreeing to collaborate with me in a study of her beliefs and practices, Anna made herself vulnerable to several levels of potential harm against which I felt ethically obliged to protect her. It was conceivable, for example, that my research could have undermined her relationship with her students, created dissension among her colleagues, or even caused her to lose her job. Throughout our work together, I attempted to minimize the potential for these kinds of harm. On the first day of school, I introduced myself to each of her classes, telling them exactly who I was and what I would be doing there. I also carefully explained my research to any of Anna's colleagues who inquired about my presence at

Windrow High School. I viewed myself as a kind of guest at Windrow, and I made every effort to treat my hosts—the students, the faculty, and the administration—with dignity and respect.

However, as Cassell (1982) notes, harm in qualitative research is most likely to occur not in the course of daily interactions between the research participants, but in the course of writing and dissemination. The literature is filled with instances of researchers who have caused anger and dissension among those whom they have studied simply because of the ways in which they have written and disseminated their findings (Johnson, 1982). In one such instance, an anthropologist studied a small, rural town in the United States and later wrote a book detailing his findings. Apparently, most of the town members did not fully understand his role as an anthropologist; they thought that he was simply recording the history their town. Thus, when the book was published, many townspeople were highly disturbed to see some of the most intimate details of their lives recorded in print. Even though the author had attempted to protect his informants by using pseudonyms, their true identities were easily recognizable to anyone familiar with the area. Fifteen years later, another anthropologist who visited the town was surprised to discover that the local library's copy of the book had the real names of all the individuals penciled in next to their pseudonyms (Johnson, 1982). Even after all those years, some of the community members were still visibly upset about the ways in which they had been portrayed.

While I have gone to great lengths to avoid such a scenario in my study with Anna, there are still issues regarding dissemination over which I have little control. For example, when I interpreted Anna's life, I may have done so with great respect and responsibility, but once my work has been disseminated, I have little control over how someone else might interpret or use it. People come to texts with all kinds of prior conceptions and personal agendas, and they may

inadvertently (or purposely) take something out of context and place it in their own writing, thereby causing harm or discomfort to Anna. It is possible, for instance, that she may be unfairly criticized—or she may be lauded as an exemplary teacher, which is one outcome that she particularly wanted to avoid. She made it clear that she did not want to be held up as an exemplar, and I tried not to present her in this way in my writing. However, my good intentions will do little to prevent someone else from holding her up as an exemplar once my work has been disseminated.

To mitigate these kinds of risk, Anna and I decided to use a pseudonym instead of her real name. Even though it may be a thin disguise for her real identity, just by having a pseudonym, we felt that we would be sending the implicit message to anyone who reads my work that Anna was not seeking attention, and we believed that readers would then have an ethical responsibility to honor her desire to remain anonymous. While this stance may afford Anna some degree of protection from outsiders, we know that the use of a pseudonym offers little protection to Anna, her students, or her colleagues from knowledgeable insiders. Colleagues, administrators, and other school personnel will know exactly who she is, no matter how well we try to protect her identity. Therefore, I depended greatly upon Anna herself to help minimize this risk. Because she knew the people and the politics of her work environment much better than I did, I relied upon her to critically read my work and tell me when she felt something might be problematic.

## The Benefits of Anonymity

Anonymity has traditionally been viewed as a fundamental component of any research involving human subjects. Long perceived as a valuable instrument for protecting research participants against possible harm, it is typically offered almost as a "knee-jerk" response, with little or no thought given to the ultimate

consequences. Recently, however, some researchers, such as Schulz (1997), have begun to question the practice of stripping research participants of their true identities, and thus depriving them of any credit for their contributions. From this perspective, anonymity is seen as a pernicious tool for marginalizing research participants, and Shulz maintains that it is a "matter of ethics not to ensure anonymity, but rather to give full naming credit to the co-participants in a study" (p. 104).

Anna and I grappled with this dilemma again and again throughout our work together. The reason that we originally chose to use a pseudonym instead of her real name was to protect her, her students, her colleagues, and her school from potential harm. Initially, I was much more concerned about this than Anna was. Not only was I concerned about the unknown risks that might emerge when my writing was disseminated, but I also felt that using a pseudonym was an important part of the research protocol—a well-established tradition that I ought not violate. At that time, Anna did not really care whether or not we used her real name.

Over time, however, the issue became much more complex for us, and we vacillated. Did we want use a pseudonym—or not? Some of the drafts of my work contained her real name, while others did not. Ultimately, we decided to stick with the pseudonym because we began to recognize that there were benefits to having anonymity beyond simply providing protection. For example, we recognized that using a pseudonym created a useful persona that enabled critique. Because of the fictive nature of life history research, lives are not simply recorded verbatim. Instead, they are created and interpreted for public critique. Through her pseudonym of "Anna," the real Anna became a fictive creation that could be interpreted and re-interpreted as a text. As "Anna," she is subject to any reader's

interpretation and revision, and she is available for public critique. In contrast, the real Anna is not comfortable in this role, and she does not invite critique.

Anna once told me that she felt much more comfortable reading about "Anna" than reading about herself when I used her real name. She explained,

> You are creating the character that I play—the role that I have enacted as a teacher—but I am not limited by those descriptions. (Unlike 'Anna'), I can continue to grow and change. My beliefs about literacy will continue to evolve, (whereas Anna's will forever be frozen in the text.)

In this sense, the use of a pseudonym empowered the real Anna to move beyond the "Anna" that I had created in the text. It enabled her to feel at ease in the way that I had characterized her in my writing. In addition, this distance between the fictive creation of "Anna" and the real Anna—and the comfort that it instilled in her—empowered me as a researcher. I felt like I could take more risks without thinking, "Oh, I can't show this to her. What if it hurts her feelings? What if she is upset by it? What if she is so offended that she quits the study?" Knowing that Anna felt removed from "Anna," enabled me to explore her life and career in ways that I would not have felt comfortable in attempting if I had been using her real name.

## Sharing the Risk

I also felt empowered by the fact that I had chosen to present my work with Anna in the context of my own autobiography, and was therefore revealing as much (or more) about myself in my writing as I was about Anna. By placing myself at risk in this way, I felt much more comfortable about the risks that she was assuming, because I was not asking her to submit to anything that I was not submitting myself to. By including own autobiography, I have made myself vulnerable to several levels of inadvertent or intentional harm that might arise

as readers interpret my work and put it to use. For instance, a reader may pass judgment on me—and judge me harshly as a person—which would obviously make me feel uncomfortable. Or worse, they may actually elements of my story in their own work and do so in a way that inadvertently causes me harm. Finally, in the worst possible scenario, someone may actually use elements of my story against me with malicious intent. I immediately think of the ways in which various Presidential political appointees such as Robert Bork, Clarence Thomas, Lonnie Guinere, and Henry Foster have been mercilessly attacked in their Senate confirmation hearings on the basis of what they have written, said, and done in the past.[3] Although I have no desire to assume a public office, I would still not want a potential employer, or someone else in a position of power, to pass critical judgments upon me based upon this information.

Ultimately, however, no author has control over how his or her work will be interpreted and put to use once it has been disseminated—except to place trust in those who read it. I strongly believe that I have an ethical responsibility to be honest with readers and to not intentionally deceive them with misinformation or unwarranted perspectives, yet I maintain that this responsibility is not unilateral. Readers also have an ethical obligation to me—the writer. They are obliged to read my work with an open mind and to treat me—the writer—with the same dignity and respect that I hold out to them. I realize that such a position may be risky and idealistic, but I maintain it nevertheless.

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[3]Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas were judges nominated to the United States Supreme Court. Bork's nomination was defeated by the Senate amidst charges that he was a habitual marijuana smoker. Thomas's nomination, on the other hand, was ultimately confirmed, but only after he had endured what he termed a "high-tech lynching" following allegations that he had sexually harassed one of his former employees. Lonnie Guinere and Henry Foster were both unsuccessfully nominated to Presidential cabinet positions. Guinere, a nominee for the position of United States Attorney General, was heavily criticized for her past academic writings on affirmative action, while Foster, who sought to become the nation's Surgeon General, was attacked by political opponents after he inadvertently underestimated the number of abortions that he had performed as a doctor.

## Summary

Unlike traditional teacher research—which is based upon an objective, logical-deductive view of knowledge characterized by hypothesis testing and statistical analyses—life history and ethnographic approaches are consistent with the belief that teaching is a complex, personal endeavor shaped by influences beyond those which can be identified through rating scales, surveys, and narrowly focused observations. Because these kinds of studies typically involve the formation of human relationships that are far more complex than the limited, impersonal, business-like transactions that characterize traditional studies, their ethical dimensions cannot be effectively addressed through typical standardized procedures, such as simply using pseudonyms or obtaining the approval of a Human Subjects Review Board. Instead, like methodological issues, they must be continually dealt with at every phase of a research endeavor.

An in-depth study of a single case, such as my study with Anna, can be extremely useful as a vehicle for elaborating our understanding of similar situations. Donmoyer (1990), for example, makes a compelling argument for expanding our conception of generalizability to include the learning that we experience when we read about single cases. It is my hope that this paper can assist other qualitative researchers, who may be thinking about engaging in similar kinds of in-depth life history and ethnographic studies, to think more fully about the methodological and ethical issues they encounter.

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